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FM AMEMBASSY BANJUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6521
INFO RULSDMK/DOT WASHDC
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UNCLAS BANJUL 000191

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STATE FOR AF/W, AF/EPS, EB/TRA/OTP
FAA FOR AIA
TRANSPORTATION FOR OST
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SUBJECT: GAMBIAN CIVAIR: AIRLINE NEGOTIATIONS AND A NEW DIRECTOR
AT GCAA

REF: BANJUL 68

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. The Gambian government continues its efforts to attract a commercial air carrier that will provide direct flights to the United States. Negotiations with North American Airlines (NAA), acquired by World Air Holdings in 2005, have progressed quickly and there is a possibility for a Banjul-Baltimore flight to be in place by June. It is not clear yet what impact the appointment of a new Director General (DG) at the Gambian Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA) will have on the negotiations, but we expect GCAA to continue to seek to establish direct service between Banjul and the U.S. END SUMMARY.

NORTH AMERICAN AIRLINE'S BID FOR BANJUL-BWI SERVICE

¶2. (SBU) A team from NAA and World Air visited the Gambia in early March to investigate the possibility of adding a Banjul-Baltimore flight to its current service in West Africa. The team, along with then-GCAA Acting DG Paul Bass met with Emboffs to discuss their plan. According to World Air Holdings Chief Marketing Officer Robert Binns, NAA proposes to add one Accra-Banjul-Baltimore passenger flight per week as early as June. They are currently working on the cost agreement with GCAA for such a service and, although optimistic about the prospects, Binns did voice his concern that the issue of ground and passenger handling remained unresolved. Currently the state-owned Gambia International Airlines (GIA) has a monopoly on all handling operations at the Banjul Airport. In a March 22 email exchange with econoff, Binns expressed confidence that Bass was close to getting a "reasonable solution" from GIA.

¶3. (SBU) Mr. Bass acknowledged the handling agent issue and stated that GCAA will be working with GIA and the government so that it will not be an obstacle to attracting airlines to Banjul. His stated opinion was that the new management team at GIA, including the new Managing Director Lamin Sanyang, will make the company easier to work with than in the past. He further stated that the government has established an Air Access Task Force, chaired by Bass, to bring together all stakeholders with an eye to increasing airport traffic. The World Air and NAA executives favorably noted this development and expressed their pleasure with the level of support they have received from the government thus far.

TSA'S PRELIMINARY SECURITY ASSESSMENT

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¶4. (SBU) Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Attache John Halinski visited Banjul on March 24 to conduct a preliminary security assessment in advance of the full security review scheduled for May. He reported to econoff that the preliminary assessment did not uncover any major security problems at the airport that would prevent NAA from receiving approval to fly from Banjul to Baltimore.

¶5. (SBU) Bass traveled to Canada and Washington DC last week for GCAA, and reported to econoff that he would be meeting with NAA representatives while in Washington. In an email exchange on 23 March, Bass stated that negotiations were on track and that he felt close to resolving the issues with GIA.

NEW GCAA DIRECTOR GENERAL APPOINTED

¶6. (SBU) According to the GCAA Deputy DG, the GCAA's Director of Commerce, Fansu Bojang, was appointed the new DG of GCAA on March 24. Paul Bass, who had been acting GCAA DG since November 2005, will return to his former position as Director of Flight Safety Standards.

SAA BANJUL-U.S. SERVICE - A DISTANT PROSPECT

¶7. (SBU) In February, South African Airways (SAA) took out a full page advertisement in local newspapers announcing that direct flights from Banjul to JFK were "coming soon". When asked about the ads, then Acting GCAA DG Bass replied that the SAA public relations office was getting ahead of itself. He said that the airline has not yet applied for a license to operate out of Banjul and there are no firm plans for SAA to begin flights. At that point, Binns speculated that the SAA move could be a reflection of increased competition they may be facing for their transatlantic flights out of Dakar.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: The potential NAA deal is a major opportunity for The Gambia. There have been no direct flights from The Gambia to the United States since 2004, a factor holding development back in all areas of trade and tourism. It remains to be seen how potential conflicts with GIA's de facto ground handling monopoly will be resolved. GIA suspended flights in 2005 and at this point the handling operation and ticketing are its only sources of revenue. There have been a number of airlines considering transatlantic flights out of Banjul over the past year, but none have yet materialized

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: It is too early to know what changes the new DG may implement at GCAA, but we do not expect any major shift in policy, i.e., we expect the push to establish air service between Banjul and the U.S. to continue. It is possible, however, that the new DG may not be as forward-leaning as Bass was with regard to ending GIA's monopoly on handling services at Banjul airport. END COMMENT.

STAFFORD